

Censorship with a Capital “C”

[Ken Meyercord](#)

Censorship can take many forms. There’s the government censorship we associate with socialist regimes (a notable exception being Israel, which has been under military censorship for its entire existence). Take Cuba, for instance, which exercises tight control over the access its citizens have to the internet. We are encouraged to attribute this restriction to the fear Cuba’s leaders have that, if they allow information from outside to seep through, their citizens will rise up in anger over being denied the rights of a free people: inflammatory trolls, click-bait ads, and women-degrading pornography.

A recent episode in our relations with that feisty little island suggests the Cuban government may have a different reason for limiting internet access. Back in 2010, the US government—through that clandestine CIA-front organization, the US Agency for International Development—attempted to take advantage of the Cuban government’s decision to allow its citizens to own cellphones. USAID sponsored a team of geeks to send text messages to the newly linked-in Cuban populace through a service they called ZunZuneo, a sort of Cuba-specific Twitter.

The messages were initially apolitical so as not to arouse the suspicion of either the Cuban authorities or Zunzuneo’s Cuban subscribers as to who might be behind the site. Zunzuneo proved very successful initially, garnering 40,000 subscribers in just its first year. But, in the long run, Zunzuneo proved ineffective in achieving its covert objective—fomenting rebellion—especially after the Cuban government noticed it and started blocking the site. In 2012 the operation was defunded and shut down (partly because USAID was paying a large amount in text-messaging fees to the Cuban telephone company, Cubacel).*

This spy-vs-spy saga lends legitimacy to foreign governments who have incurred our displeasure constraining their citizens’ access to information from abroad. If we can get so paranoid about a rinky-dink operation in Russia directing a miniscule number of innocuous tweets our way, think how the Cubans feel, especially as in the case of the USA versus Cuba, it’s asymmetric cyberwarfare. Think of the Russian meddlers being a hundred times more powerful than they were (like our NSA) and us having one-hundredth our true capability to counter their subversion (like Cuba), how would you want our government to react?

Whatever your answer, no need to speculate on how our government would respond as we have evidence from another covert action event. In 2014, Udo Ulfkotte, a German journalist who at one time worked as an editor at one of Germany’s leading newspapers, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, published a memoir in which he claimed virtually the entire German press corps was on the payroll of the CIA. He had personal knowledge of this as he himself had been a beneficiary of CIA largesse.

The book, *Gekaufte Journalisten* (“Bought Journalists”), became a bestseller in Germany despite the German media being banned from mentioning it. An English edition, entitled *Journalists for Hire*, came out last spring but was immediately [suppressed](#). It’s listed on Amazon, but the only copy available sells for [\\$997.09](#) (plus \$3.99 shipping!). I myself preordered the book a month before it was due out but have yet to receive my copy (Amazon owes me \$13.95).

The Canadian house which published the book, Tayen Lane, has removed it from its list of publications without offering any explanation. Obviously, some very powerful censors have managed to deny the English-speaking world the benefit of Mr. Ulfkotte’s revelations, and we can’t hear from him directly any more as he died of a heart attack last year at age 56.

When I was living in Lebanon a while ago, a line popular amongst the Lebanese was, “The American media treats the American people as if they were raising mushrooms: they keep them in the dark and feed them bullshit.” The fate of *Journalists for Hire* illustrates the dark, malodorous, spore-filled trays in which we Americans are cultivated. Who needs socialist-style government censorship when capitalists do such an effective job censoring themselves? Look at how accommodating Amazon is in [removing unacceptable books](#) from its shelves, or Google in [doctoring its search results](#), Facebook in [blocking unacceptable pages](#), YouTube in [censoring controversial videos](#), and Twitter in [deleting provocative tweets and twitters](#) (unless presidential)—all with just a little prodding from an insecure, hypocritical government.

(If you’d like to read *Journalists for Hire* in our native tongue, demand the cause be taken up by such selectively indignant protectors of press freedom as [PEN America](#), which claims to “defend writers and protect free expression in the United States and around the world”; the Newseum-linked [Freedom House](#) where “freedoms of expression, association, and belief ... are guaranteed”; and George Soros’s sovereignty-infringing [Open Society](#), which believes in “encouraging critical debate and respecting diverse opinions”.)

* The information on ZunZuneo came from an article in the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper. Before you give *The Guardian*—and by extension the capitalist press in general—credit for exposing a reprehensible covert action, consider the ulterior motive they might have had for doing so. They may have sought to misdirect the Cuban government by claiming a mole within the Cuban telephone company provided the numbers of Cuba’s half-million cellphone users when the numbers were actually obtained by hacking into Cubacel’s computer. Also, the article suggests Spanish authorities were unaware a company operating on their territory was violating Spanish law by collecting politically-oriented personal data, when, more likely, the Spaniards were quite cooperative (which would justify the Cubans responding in kind). In any case, revealing the Zunzuneo scheme was harmless, as the Cubans were onto it and the operation had been terminated (replaced by something more sophisticated and better funded?).

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